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## Interrogating Malaysian literature in English: Its glories, sorrows and thematic trends

### Abstract

Malaysian literature in English has just attained its sixtieth anniversary since its modest inception in the late 1940s, initiated by a small group of college and university students in Singapore. Singapore was the academic hub of British Malaya and the only university of the colony was located there, therefore it was natural that a movement in English writing should have started from there. Nonetheless, given the current cultural and political rivalries between Singapore and Malaysia, it is rather ironic that a Malaysian tradition of writing started in a territory that now sees Malaysia as the 'other'.

MOHAMMAD QUAYUM

## Interrogating Malaysian Literature in English: Its Glories, Sorrows and Thematic Trends

Malaysian literature in English has just attained its sixtieth anniversary since its modest inception in the late 1940s, initiated by a small group of college and university students in Singapore. Singapore was the academic hub of British Malaya and the only university of the colony was located there, therefore it was natural that a movement in English writing should have started from there. Nonetheless, given the current cultural and political rivalries between Singapore and Malaysia, it is rather ironic that a Malaysian tradition of writing started in a territory that now sees Malaysia as the 'other'. There is a second irony with regard to this tradition, however; that is, it started not during the heyday of colonial rule as in the case of India, but just before the retreat of the Raj to its native shores. If we consider, say 1947 or 1948 as the starting point of Malaysian Anglophone tradition, or 1950, the year that saw the publication of Wang Gungwu's *Pulse*, it is hard to miss the inherent irony in the timing of its inception because India and Pakistan were already independent in 1947 and Malaysia was to become independent in a few years, in 1957. Of course, there are practical and political reasons for this late commencement of the tradition, and yet the fact that English writing should begin in the years immediately before the departure of the British cannot be ignored either.

Given the time that has lapsed and the new milestone that the tradition is about to reach, it seems appropriate to interrogate the glories and sorrows, possibilities and perils, of this tradition and investigate some thematic trends. The questions to be addressed are: Why has Malaysian literature in English failed to keep pace with the growth of literary activity in other postcolonial centres, like Singapore and India? What are the future possibilities of this tradition? What are some of the dominant interests or abiding postulations/moorings in the body of its works and why or how have they found their anchorage in the sensibility of these writers? To what extent have the writers of the tradition contributed to Malaysian nation-formation and to the cultivation of a dialogic sensibility that Malaysia so requires for coming to grips with its plural cultural environment? Is it possible to see writings in English as part of the Malaysian national enterprise, integrally related to the history and culture of the country, in spite of its alien medium? This essay seeks to deliberate on these issues, with particular reference to some prominent writers and with a view to rendering an account of Malaysian Literature in English.

### GLORIES AND SORROWS OF THE TRADITION

It is true that English writings have made phenomenal advances in many of the postcolonial societies in the last fifty-odd years, so much so that Salman Rushdie made the controversial claim that English writing has been more prolific in India in the post-independence period than literature in its sixteen 'official languages' and that "Indo-Anglian" literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books' (viii). Rushdie's claim might sound a bit audacious, but certainly countries like India, South Africa and even neighbouring Singapore can profess to be literary centres so far as English writing is concerned because of the sheer volume and quality of literature they have produced in the language. Can Malaysia be included in this league? Does it have a body of writing substantial and challenging enough to make it into a literary hub in English? The answer is not so clear because Malaysia has produced an oeuvre of writings in the language and yet the growth of literary activity in the medium has not been steady, substantial and continuous as compared to other countries. This is not to blame the individual writers because Malaysia has produced some very good writers in English, who are comparable to the best writers in Singapore, for example, but the socio-political-cultural circumstances of the country have dogged the English literary scene, including the careers of its most established writers, from the beginning.

I'll come to the sorrows of the tradition or challenges faced by writers in the English language later, but let me first point out its glories, or what the tradition has accomplished in the last forty-odd years. In an essay published in 2003 in *Kunapipi* (written in late 2001),<sup>1</sup> I discussed the achievements of Malaysian English writers and pointed out that Malaysia has produced a body of writers who deserve serious critical attention. These include Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam, Muhammad Haji Salleh, Salleh Ben Joned and Shirley Geok-lin Lim in poetry; Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang, K.S. Maniam and Shirley Geok-lin Lim in fiction; and K.S. Maniam and Kee Thuan Chye in drama. These are writers who have written substantially as well as meaningfully, with sufficient craftsmanship and depth in their work to make it worthy of critical attention. Some of these writers have earned considerable recognition including in some instances, literary prizes from home and abroad. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, for example, was the first Asian and first woman writer to receive the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in 1980, for her collection of poetry *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*; Kee Thuan Chye won the Australian Cultural Award in 1994, and K.S. Maniam was honoured with the Raja Rao Award for Fiction by the Indian Sahityya Academy in 2000. Shirley Geok-lin Lim also won the Asiaweek Short Story Competition Second Prize in 1982 and American Book Award for her acclaimed memoir *Among the White Moon Faces: Asian American Memoir of Homelands* in 1997, and K.S. Maniam won first prizes in The Straits Times-McDonald and The Straits Times-Shell Short Story Competitions in 1987 and

1990 respectively. However, what is noteworthy is that two of the writers in the list have already passed away and those living are in their sixties and seventies, with Kee Thuan Chye, the youngest of all, in his fifties.

I also listed a second group of writers in that essay. These include Adibah Amin, Nirmala Raghavan, Che Husna Azhari, Chuah Guat Eng, Rehman Rashid, Karim Raslan, Amir Muhammad and Dina Zaman. However, their achievements are often limited to one book, as in the case of Chuah Guat Eng and Rehman Rashid; or they show more interest in journalistic writings than serious literary works such as fiction, poetry and drama, as with Karim Raslan, Amir Muhammad and Dina Zaman. Some of the writers, such as Adibah Amin and Nirmala Raghavan, are also bilingual which affects the volume of their output in the English language. However, this list too, like the previous one, includes few younger writers, which is where, I think, the problem lies with Malaysian English literature: there has been a lack of continuity in the tradition and it has failed to flourish at a steady pace as with Indian and Singaporean literatures. The strong tradition started by the first and second generation writers has become sporadic, sluggish and aimless for lack of comparable writers in the new generation.

I do not think the literary scene in the country has changed in any significant way since the publication of my essay. 2002 and 2003 saw the publication of three novels, one collection of plays, two volumes of occasional-journalistic writings, and an anthology. The novels include Lee Kok Liang's *London Does Not Belong to Me* — the story of a young law student in England, probably written in the 1950s but published eleven years after the author's death<sup>2</sup>; K.S. Maniam's *Between Lives*; and Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* — the story of four generations of women in a Malaysian family spanning most of the twentieth century, for which she was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, in the regional category, in 2003. Karim Raslan's *Journeys Through Southeast Asia: Ceritalah 2* and Farish Noor's *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History* were both published in late 2002; Huzir Sulaiman's *Eight Plays* in 2003, and *Petals of Hibiscus: A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English*, which I co-edited, in 2003. 2005 saw the publication of Rani Manicka's second novel, *Touching Earth* and Tash Aw's debut novel *The Harmony Silk Factory* (which won the Whitbread Book Award as well as the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Novel for 2005), while Wong Phui Nam's first play, *Anike*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim's second novel, *Sister Swing* and Kee Thuan Chye's fourth play, *The Swordfish, Then the Concubine*, were published in 2006. There has also been a steady stream of edited anthologies by Silverfishbooks, but these volumes include stories by writers from Singapore and Australia as well. These are obviously exceedingly heartening and sure signs of progress, but still the majority of the publications are by the early writers of the tradition and some by writers who have crossed the national borders and taken on the identity of Malaysian diasporic writers. Moreover, the overall progress of

the tradition does not seem to compare with the other postcolonial literary centres mentioned above, either in terms of volume or pace.

As mentioned earlier, there are obvious socio-cultural-political reasons for this relatively slow and interrupted growth of English writing in Malaysia. The most formidable of these are the country's language policy and the uncompromising notion of what constitutes its 'national literature'. I believe the policy of having a national language itself is socially-culturally beneficial as Malaysia needs a common language to create a semblance of unity and harmony among its culturally and racially diverse population. One might argue that English, as a neutral language without the undesirable connotations associated with the local languages or the markers of ethnic and religious prejudices, would have been a better choice for a national language in a complex sociolinguistic setting like Malaysia. Every choice has its pros and cons: the neutrality of English would probably have helped to create a better ethnic and administrative cohesiveness in the country, and placed Malaysia at a more advantageous position in the community of nations for having a language of global communication as its national language, but then there are many cultural, social and political implications that accompany the use of an external language. For one thing, the use of English as the national language would have seriously compromised the identity of Malaysia as a nation; it would have subverted the local cultures, interfered with people's ways of thinking and articulating their ideas, and continued the process of colonial subjugation through the power discourse associated with English as a language. Besides, it would require the whole nation to sacrifice its past and present and look away from its collective soul for the sake of pragmatism.

Bahasa Malaysia was therefore not a wrong choice as the national language for this newly emergent nation. It was the pre-colonial language of the land and the language of the majority of its population in the post-colonial period. The choice of Malay as Malaysia's national language makes more sense than India's choice of Hindi, which was just another regional language with no better historical claim than Bengali or Tamil, for example; or the attempt by the founders of Pakistan to elevate Urdu to the country's national language, when it had several indigenous languages of its own and Bengali was spoken by the majority of its citizens. One might accept, albeit somewhat grudgingly if one belonged to a Malaysian minority community, Mahathir Mohammad's argument in *The Malay Dilemma* that as immigrants to the US or Australia are required to learn English and accept it as the national language in order to get citizenship, a similar principle of national unity could also be adopted in this newly independent, multi-racial, Southeast Asian nation ('The Bases of National Unity').

However, although the policy itself was not divisive and exclusionary, its rigid definition and binary method of implementation has thwarted the growth of English writing in the country. In Malaysia even to question the status of Malay as the national language is considered seditious, which is obviously excessive

compared to the policies in the US or India, where greater flexibility is allowed in people's attitudes to the national language. Moreover, in Malaysia, as a continuation of the language policy, only literature in Bahasa Malaysia is accorded the status of national literature. In fact, since the introduction of the Language Act in 1967, Malaysian literature has been divided into two categories: 'national literature', or literature written in the national language; and 'sectional literature', or literature written in English and the country's other ethnic languages. This exclusionary approach, which translates into the withholding of support from the government institutions if a writer chooses not to write in the national language, has caused severe repercussions for non-Malay writings, including English, in the country. It has led to the pampering and protection of mediocrity and rejection of fair competition among writers, which is again different from the practices in India and Singapore where writers in all major languages are treated equally and considered for national support and national prizes. Comparing the literary scenes in Singapore and Malaysia, Kee Thuan Chye laments:

Singapore respects literature in any language written by its citizens. By and large, Singapore upholds a meritocratic system. It nominates writers from across the language spectrum for its Cultural Medallion and for the SEA Write Award whereas here in Malaysia, you'd have to be writing in Malay to qualify to become a National Laureate or even be considered for the SEA Write Award, which is actually bestowed by an external body. In fact, year after year, the winning of the SEA Write Award by Malaysians has become a mockery. It's a case of the writers in Malay waiting their turn to be called. (Quayum 2005 137)

This monolithic view of national language and the consequent reductive definition of national literature has been the main stumbling block for the growth of literary activity in English. First and foremost, it has pushed writings in English (together with writings in other ethnic languages) to the margins of national culture, forcing some writers to forsake English as a literary medium and frustrating others who could not but continue writing in the language. For the first- and second-generation writers who were educated in English schools in the colonial era, English as a medium of literary expression was not a matter of choice but one that was determined by their environment. The options left for them in the face of this essentialist political development were either to continue writing in spite of the consequences, migrate to a new land where they would be more at home with their tongue, or just stop writing. Lee Kok Liang and Lloyd Fernando chose the first option and stayed with their medium and in the country; Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim chose the second option and emigrated to Australia and the US respectively; and Wong Phui Nam chose the third option, albeit temporarily, before deciding to write again after a considerable period of silence. Only native speakers of the language like Adibah Amin, Muhammad Haji Salleh and Salleh Ben Joned managed to branch out into Malay and straddle two languages.

It is possible that some of the writers who were born in the Malayan territory that now constitutes Malaysia chose to stay back in Singapore after the political

separation between the two countries, or later moved to Singapore and other countries, because of the stiff policies on language and literature. Would Catherine Lim or Suchen Christine Lim have made Singapore their home if the hierarchic policies and privileging norms in matters of language and literature had not been adopted? I believe there is no clear answer to such a question, although there is room for conjecture that the outcome might have been otherwise if Malaysia had adopted a more inclusivist and accommodating spirit in its definition of national literature. I recently took the opportunity of asking both Catherine Lim and Suchen Christine Lim as to why we should not consider them as Malaysian writers in the same way as we continue to view Shirley Geok-lin Lim as a Malaysian writer in spite of her emigration to and subsequent citizenship in the US, or as critics see Bharati Mukherjee as an Indian writer despite her domicile in the US. Suchen Christine Lim responded with considerable ambiguity, suggesting that she belonged to both (Malaysia and Singapore) and was grateful to both, because 'one gave [her] life, the other gave [her] an upbringing' (Quayum 2005 152). Catherine Lim's response, however, was a more resounding 'no'. As she was born and educated in Malaysia, and since she wrote about her childhood memories in Malaysia, I asked her whether it would be appropriate to consider her a Malaysian writer? Her reply was:

I find it difficult to consider myself a 'Malaysian writer' rather than a 'Singaporean writer', simply because I suppose my sense of being a Singaporean is so strong, Singapore being the country I have adopted, grown to love very much and will always be committed to. (Quayum 2005 23)

One is left to wonder if the status of English and English writing in the country has anything to do with Catherine Lim's such strong attachments for Singapore and a concomitant apathy towards the country that gave her life and provided shelter and protection for the first twenty eight years.

The rigidity in the language policy and the exclusionary view of national literature has also contributed to the relative lack of dedicated new-generation writers in the language. Earlier I pointed out how the English literary scene in Malaysia is still very much dominated by the first- or second-generation writers who were born before the inception of Malaysia. This is because those who were born in the emancipated, post-colonial Malaysia were influenced by the Language Act of 1967 in one way or another. As a result, they were either not adequately exposed to the language or they saw the futility of pursuing it as a literary medium. The language enactment, and its amendment in 1971 to further bolster the position of Bahasa Malaysia, resulted in minimal support for the teaching of English and for English activities; English literature especially suffered both at the secondary school and tertiary levels. Before the language enactment, English was widely used in schools and offices, but after the enactment, English as a medium of education was slowly phased out from the National schools and Government administration was run absolutely in the Malay language. Although



English remained as an academic subject in schools, passing it was not a strict requirement to enter university, and whatever English was taught was also on a functional basis, without any inclusion of literary texts in the curriculum or emphasis on the creative and imaginative potential of the language. Literature was also de-emphasised at the university level as most of the English Departments specialised in the teaching of language only, with little or no attention to literature and literary texts.

All these factors amounted to an indifferent environment for the emergence of new writers in the language. Absence of literature or literary texts in the school curriculum would have limited the exposure of students to English-language writers and the potential to exercise their own creative faculties in the language. In fact, Malaysia still does not have English medium schools where local students could enrol freely without permission from the Ministry of Education, and in spite of some changes in the English curriculum in schools (literature was reintroduced as a component of the English syllabus in 1999), the situation is still not conducive to producing writers in the language in any significant way. The handful of younger generation writers that we see practising the craft developed their love for writing in English either because of the individual family environment they grew up in — in which English was possibly still a favoured language and somehow used for daily interaction and expression — or more probably because they have benefited from the changed policy of sending students to English speaking countries for their education during the Mahathir era (1981–2003). This is certainly true for most of the younger or third generation writers of the English language mentioned in this article, such as Karim Raslan, Farish Noor, Dina Zaman, Rani Manicka and Tash Aw (the last two currently residing in the UK).

The language act also had an adverse effect on the English publication industry and it severely restricted the possibility of publishing works in English, especially by new writers. Publication in a money-driven society is invariably linked to readership; fewer readers means little or no interest from publishers. Publication still remains a major barrier for writers, although the interest in English and English activities has picked up considerably in the last fifteen or so years. There is also the problem of confidence for young writers, who could hardly see the value of their writing even in a positive environment. The problem is greatly compounded when the threat of rejection is palpable to them, and when they cannot even properly decide whether it would be worthwhile to write and publish in English in a country where literary activities in the language are deliberately marginalised and treated with the reduced status of ‘sectional literature’.<sup>3</sup> Dina Zaman sums up the problem of English writing in Malaysia, especially for younger writers:

I suppose my writing in English initially unsettled a few scholars and academics. When I began writing in the 90s academics kept asking me why I wrote in English and not Malay. I’m Malay and I should write in Malay.... In general, writing in Malaysia tends to be the domain of Malay writers. I have to admit when I think of writers, I think of

Pak Samad etc first then K.S. Maniam. This has nothing to do with the quality of their writing, but because of what we were told/informed. (Quayum 2007 297, 299)

The pressure to write in Malay is not on Malay writers alone but on all Malaysian writers, although the Malay writers feel it more acutely owing to the risk of being singled out as traitors to the culture. After all, the logic goes: Malay is the national language and there are so many personal benefits for the writer, from economic to cultural, for writing in it, so why should a Malay writer choose not to write in the language? The extent to which writing in English involves marginalisation and invisibility is obvious from Dina's statement; a writer in English herself, she cannot help but think that a writer in Malaysia means a writer in the national language first. That is how the political and cultural machinery works against the writers in English in the country and the net result is, as I have suggested earlier, the 'othering' and exclusion of writings in English and an interrupted and slow growth of the tradition.

There are many other challenges faced by writers in Malaysia, such as the censorship laws which prohibit writers from venturing into so-called politically and culturally 'sensitive subjects'; the recurrent threat of the Internal Security Act (ISA) that allows arrest and confinement of an individual by the authorities without any specific allegations, fostering an environment of fear and self-censorship among writers; social and religious taboos on topics of literary interest such as love, desire, and sex; and a general apathy towards literature in an environment that glorifies material and technological developments. These are problems encountered by writers in general and across the spectrum and do not necessarily contribute to the subordination of English writing within the national culture. I have discussed some of these issues in a separate essay published in the *CRNLE Journal* in 2001.<sup>4</sup>

#### **THEMATIC TRENDS IN THE TRADITION**

Malaysian literature in English is rich and diverse in its thematic scope; it encompasses sundry social, political and cultural issues intrinsic to the local society. Malaysia is a unique country with a unique set of problems and possibilities. For one thing, it is a newly independent nation. It had never experienced nationhood before the departure of the British in 1957. Besides, Malaysia is a polyglot and pluralistic society, with many races, cultures and languages coexisting within its borders. It is both an old and new society; some of its population has inhabited the place for centuries, while others were brought over during the colonial period. It is also a grappling ground for tradition and modernisation; much of its life-style is bound by tradition but there are also the new values introduced from the West by its rapid modernisation. All these issues and complexities are represented and reflected in the works of writers in English. However, the primary interest of these writers seems to be nationalism and nation formation. They often criticise Malaysian culture with a view to establishing a fair and equitable society and a

nation that is inclusive and accommodative in spirit. They are keen to dismantle hierarchies in caste, class, sex and race so that an harmonious, balanced and humane society might be established in Malaysia. Their overwhelming sympathies are for the subalterns and the socially disadvantaged, and they seek to dissipate all forms of prejudice, exclusivism and bigotry in their imagination of the nation. One could argue this thesis in all the genres of this tradition, but let me examine a select body of its fiction for the purposes of this essay.

Poetry came first in the Malaysian Anglophone tradition, followed by short stories in the sixties and novels in the 1970s and 1980s. There are quite a few anthologies and individual collections of short stories that have come out since the publication of Lloyd Fernando's *Twenty-Two Malaysian Short Stories* (1968) and *Malaysian Short Stories* (1981). Some of the early short stories were also published in local journals and magazines, such as *LIDRA* and *Tengarra*. Many of these stories focus on poverty and destitution in Malaysian society in order to expose its class and caste hierarchy. They also argue that indigence is not a race problem but a class problem; the oppressed and the humiliated are found in all the various ethnic groups in the country. Poverty was acute in Malaysian society in the aftermath of independence because of the Japanese Occupation and the Communist insurgency in the 1940s and the 1950s respectively, which had thrown the country's export economy into disarray, causing, as Andaya and Andaya suggest, widespread 'unemployment, food shortages, poverty, poor health and general uncertainty' (258). Poverty still remains a problem in some sectors of the society, in spite of the country's phenomenal economic growth in the last twenty years, because of lack of equitable distribution of wealth among its citizens.

The themes of poverty and class distinction are highlighted in Siew Yue Killingley's 'A Question of Dowry', Pretam Kaur's 'Pasang' and 'Through the Wall', Shirley Geok-lin Lim's 'Hunger', and Dina Zaman's 'Philippa' and 'Night and Day'.<sup>5</sup> All these stories show how impoverishment affects the life of the social and economic 'other'. Killingley's 'A Question of Dowry' is the story of an Indian couple which fails to marry off their daughter because they cannot raise the money required for her dowry. The story criticises the age-old tradition of the dowry system in Indian society, which the Malaysian-Indians, unfortunately, have failed to relinquish despite their departure from their homeland; but it also shows how lack of money can adversely affect the life of an individual and a family, since Sivasothie, the young girl whose marriage falls through because of lack of dowry, faces the prospect of remaining a spinster all her life and being a social stigma for her parents (as unmarried women are seen very unkindly in the traditional Indian cultural perspective).

Pretam Kaur's 'Pasang' is the story of a young Punjabi boy, Chranpal, who is so poor that he cannot even afford a *pasang* (a top) which he desperately requires to mingle with the rest of the children. It is most touching when the little boy goes

to his mother for money to buy a top and all the mother can do is to helplessly squall at him, 'Well, you can sell me and buy a top for yourself.... Top, top, ten cents, ten cents, forever, you have eaten my ears with your endless noise. Go away. I don't have any money' (38). The story can be read as an allegory, as the boy's failure to mingle with the rest of the children for lack of a top can be seen as the failure of the Malaysian poor to enter the mainstream community and stake their claim in the new country due to their lack of resources and means. 'Through the Wall' depicts the lives of two poverty-stricken families, one Punjabi and the other Chinese, who have large families but share a house, partitioned by a plank wall. The Punjabi man keeps cows, while the Chinese is a trishaw peddler. One day the latter's wife gives birth to a beautiful girl but the family is so impoverished that they are forced to sell her to two Malay women for \$90. This shatters the mother emotionally and forces her into isolation and insanity. Both the stories highlight the problems of privation in the minority communities in Malaysia and show how children were deprived of their normal childhood or mothers of their maternal love owing to their overwhelming penury.

Poverty is also the dominant theme in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's 'Hunger', in which the eight-year-old protagonist, Chai, experiences acute deprivation and hunger despite her being a bright student and intellectually gifted: 'She had this secret machine inside her that could eat up books, swallow them whole, then give them back in bits and pieces, as good almost as before she ate them' (7). At recess in school, when all the other children rushed to the stalls for food or ate their 'fried noodles or sardine sandwiches or rice cakes', Chai 'waited in the classroom till she thought they had finished eating, then she went out to play with them' (10). Chai's problem is compounded by the fact that her mother has deserted the family and left her with an unbearable emotional hunger as well. Deprived physically and emotionally, Chai eventually sacrifices her innocence and yields to the temptation of a guava from a neighbouring old man, who in exchange 'put his hand under her dress and stroked her front' (12). The next day, the girl collects a ten-cent coin from the paedophilic old man and allows him to stroke 'her arms and chest, his eyes shut mysteriously' (12). On the third day, however, the girl resists the temptation realising that the old man has nothing more to offer than money, while she needs both love and money. The story shows how poverty can bring destructive and grievous ill in society, although the story also criticises parental irresponsibility in the mother who has selfishly abandoned the family, as well as the practices of sexual abuse and exploitation of children by the materially empowered but morally hollow haves of society.

Dina Zaman's two stories, 'Philippa' and 'Night and Day', also deal with poverty and the lives of the marginalised and the often forgotten in contemporary Malaysia. 'Philippa' is the story of an immigrant Eurasian-Indonesian woman who has come to this country as a domestic help, and Midah, a transvestite, who lives a shady life in the seedy streets of Kuala Lumpur. They are the lowest of

the low and live in extreme destitution and near sub-human conditions, and their agonies of being the insulted and the humiliated are underscored in the narrative. 'Night and Day' is the story of an economically underprivileged male prostitute and his psychologically confused, alienated but economically empowered female client. There is also a transvestite in this story, who is seen as marginalised even within the layer of the marginalised, as the male prostitute, who is himself poor and seen with considerable prejudice on account of his lowly occupation, treats the transvestite as worth less than him. This shows that class hierarchy in Malaysian society is far more complex than one might think; there is the binary of the rich and poor, but within the dichotomy there are layers of distinctions and classifications which will need to be deconstructed and reconstructed if a horizontal and equitable society is to be accomplished — a task that is monumental if not overly idealistic and utopian, but well worth the aspiration for a new and growing nation.

Gender hierarchy and the ruthless victimisation of women (including young girls) and their fortitude and endurance are addressed in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's 'Journey', 'Life's Mysteries', 'Mr Tang's Girls' and 'Sisters'; Hilary Tham's, 'The Discovery' and 'Unborn Tomorrow'; Cynthia Anthony's 'Nannan', K.S. Maniam's 'Mala', Che Husna Azhari's 'Mariah' and Dina Zaman's 'The Fat Woman'. These are stories written and published over a period of about thirty years and by writers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, but they all share the common theme of gender binary and oppression of women in a tradition-bound, androcentric society. 'Journey', Lim's first published story, written when she was an undergraduate student at the University of Malaya, is about a young girl who witnesses her mother's distress in an abortion and comes to realise that in spite of her personal courage and resourcefulness, the mother is a victim of her biology (she has seven children and is pregnant again) and an indifferent, unfeeling, egocentric male world; her journey of life is viciously manipulated and controlled by the good-for-nothing father who is totally obsessed with gambling and sees his wife as nothing more than a sexual object, without the subjectivity and agency of a human person. 'Life's Mysteries' reveals the anxieties of a ten year old Swee Liang about being a girl instead of a boy, which she thinks has been mysteriously causing her parents to drift apart; in her innocence, the girl considers a sex change operation so that she can get her father's love again and help reunite the parents.

'Mr Tang's Girls' is the story of four girls in the second family of Ah Kong, an affluent but insensitive and traditional father, who fails to cope with the growing sexuality of the eldest girl. He tries to marry her off to one of his assistants as his second wife. His anxieties are eventually transformed into a nightmare in which he is first seduced and then murdered by the eldest daughter. 'Sisters', an excerpt from Lim's second novel, *Sister Swing*, is a rewriting of 'Mr Tang's Girls', with a more comical ending. Here also the polygamous father, who likes to dominate and have full control over his family, fails to cope with the growing

sexuality of his daughters and dies of a heart attack one night when he suddenly and most shockingly discovers his daughters looking at their private organs in a mirror in their room. These two stories are somewhat different in that they depict the subordination and othering of women but also provide resistance to male authority through caricatures of the father.

Tham's 'The Discovery' embodies a powerful criticism of men's obsession with women as sexual objects. It begins with a young man's discovery that the father he idolised is a philanderer and ends with the young man himself following in the father's footsteps after his marriage. Kim San, who has seen his mother's sufferings from his father's betrayal, fails to learn from the experience, which shows the author's scepticism about men's sexual integrity and honesty and their inaptitude for maintaining honest matrimonial relationships. 'Unborn Tomorrow' tells the tragic tale of a girl's drowning in the sea in the resort town of Port Dickson because the family chose the boy over her for swimming lessons. The message of the story is loud and clear — such gender discriminations and derelictions are not only disabling for the individual but they can also eventuate in the untimely death of a person.

In 'Nannan', Cynthia Anthony pays tribute to a Burmese-Portuguese grandmother who survived the cruelties of a stepmother and a vicious husband, who not only had extramarital affairs but also abused her physically. The traumatised woman gave birth to fifteen children and endured six abortions but never gave up on her family; only when her youngest child finished his education did she file for divorce and find her freedom. The story encapsulates the sufferings of countless Malaysian/Asian women who endured all hardships and hostility for the sake of their families and found emancipation in love and devotion for their children and/or grandchildren.

K.S. Maniam's 'Mala' recounts the life of a young Indian girl abused by her parents and exploited by her husband. Mala marries Sankar to escape her sufferings at home with her parents, triggered by her bad performance in school, but the husband exploits her sexually to meet his own appetite as well as to gain mileage with his business clients. At the end of the story, Mala is compared to a mannequin and there are hints that she might end up as a prostitute like Lucy, who has been sharing the flat with Sankar even before Mala moved in as his wife.

If the stories of Lim and Tham deal with lives of women in the Chinese community, and Anthony's and Maniam's in the Eurasian and Indian communities respectively, Azhari's 'Mariah' and Zaman's 'The Fat Woman' demonstrate how women experience the same marginalisation, subjugation and injustice in the Malay community. 'Mariah' is a fine story about the practice of polygamy, in which an Islamic priest (Imam) marries a beautiful widow as his second wife because the woman reminds him of his adolescent love, and the Imam feels no compunction over the emotional and psychological torment it brings upon his first wife. It is an example of wanton abuse of religion for the fulfilment of personal

sexual appetites. 'The Fat Woman' is also about lust and appetite as it narrates the tragic life of an unnamed fat prostitute who is abused and hated (because she is so fat) by everyone in the neighbourhood. Unable to cope with the exploitation and animosity of her neighbours, she finally chooses to switch off emotionally and live an unfeeling and stoic life: 'She did not allow herself to care any longer. She knew she had to stop feeling. She had to be that way because there was no way to deal with life if one felt' (93). Again, this is the story of many Malaysia/Asian women who continue to suffer the biases and brutalities of a male centred culture, passively and in silence.

Some of the stories discussed under poverty and class discrimination also address the issue of the gender binary. Sivasothie's problem in Killingley's 'A Question of Dowry' arises precisely because she is a woman; it is the same with the trishaw peddler's wife in Kaur's 'Through the Wall' and Chai in Lim's 'Hunger'. Probably the fate of each of these characters would have been different if they were not circumscribed by their sexual identity. Some of the stories, however, also bring up the issue of racial divide in the country and the necessity of reconciling the differences in order to build a tolerant, vibrant and harmonious nation. 'Through the Wall' shows friendly relations between an Indian and a Chinese family, but in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's 'On Christmas Day in the Morning', it's the opposite. A fracas breaks out in the story between a Chinese and a Eurasian family, living next to one another, because the boy from the Chinese family becomes friendly with the girl from the Eurasian family. The story is told through the eyes of a young girl who is left completely puzzled as the families start cursing and hollering at one another on a Christmas morning over a trivial incident involving adolescents. The narrative depicts the distrust and disunity between the races in the early stages of the country's nationhood, which unfortunately has not healed because of the race-oriented political structure and certain privileging policies of the Government, although the establishment has been trying proactively to portray a more positive picture of the situation.

However, Lim's 'Another Country' is an optimistic story which delineates the friendly relationship among three characters, a Malay woman and two Chinese individuals, in a hospital in Kuala Lumpur, where they have been admitted with illness. The Malay character's friendly attitude towards the two Chinese figures, in spite of her own mortal illness, is an expression of the writer's hope that cross-cultural equanimity and harmony is possible in the country if the present hierarchical binary were effectively dismantled and people were allowed to live in mutual trust and in a human bond of 'spontaneous fellowship', without having their racial or religious sentiments stoked for the selfish gains of certain groups with vested interests. In this sense, the story reads like a political allegory, similar to Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001) or Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and *Green is the Colour* (1993).<sup>6</sup>

The novels, as I mentioned earlier, also delineate the themes of poverty, gender discrimination and race relationships in the country, with a view to constructing a



dialogic, composite and synergic nation. I see the prevalence of these themes, in various degrees, in the novels of Fernando and Lim cited above as well as in K.S. Maniam's *The Return* (1981) — four of the better known novels in the tradition.

*Scorpion Orchid* is the first English novel published in Malaysia. It is set in the Singapore of the 1950s and against the backdrop of the riots that engulfed the island during the period. The novel hinges on a group of four multiracial friends — Sabran, a Malay; Santinathan, an Indian; Guan Kheng, a Chinese; and Peter, a Eurasian — and shows how their relationship is affected by the volatile situation. Within this framework, the writer addresses all three themes, although the main focus of the novel lies with race relations and the ways of overcoming the present divides to create a holistic nation. Poverty and class discrimination are addressed in the impoverished *kampung* life of Sabran before he lands a scholarship to study in Singapore, as well as in the meagre life-style of Santinathan and his sister Neela, as against Guan Kheng and Peter who come from an affluent, urban background. The gender binary is addressed in Sally-Salmah's abuse at the hands of her elderly, impotent husband and in her bodily violation by a rowdy crowd at the height of the riots. It is the riot itself and its consequences for the future of the island that preoccupies the writer throughout most of the novel. The narrative looks rather cynical at the outer level as lawlessness and violence keep spreading like a virus, but underneath the writer indicates how Singapore could forge a better future for itself by fostering tolerance and mutual respect between its races, and by adopting policies that would help to unify the nation, when the British forsake their 'white man's burden' and Singapore becomes independent and self-reliant.

Fernando's second novel, *Green is the Colour*, also addresses the issues of race relations and nation formation, but this time the focus changes to post-independent and post-colonial Malaysia. Set against the backdrop of the interracial riots of 13th May 1969, the novel examines what went wrong and how the mistakes could be amended to create a more inclusivist and dynamic nation. This novel does not address the issue of class hierarchy explicitly as it dramatises the relationships of a group of middle-class characters from different ethnic backgrounds during the volatile period: Siti Sara, a university lecturer and her Harvard educated husband, Omar; Gita, also a lecturer and her husband, English-educated lawyer Dahlan; Yung Ming and Panglima, both civil servants; and Sara's father, a religious teacher. The gender binary and the plights of women are highlighted in the sexual abuse of Sara, by both Omar and Panglima, as well as in Gita's 'othering' by her father who prevents her from marrying her first boyfriend so that she can look after the old man. It shows how women's wishes and aspirations were regarded as insignificant compared to the whims of men during the period. Again, as in the previous novel, the main preoccupation of the writer is race relations in the country and the ways to build trust and forge bridges so that a more harmonious and wholesome society might be created out of its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural population. The author's suggestions for this are manifold, but his strongest hopes are manifest



in the cross-cultural unions between Gita (Indian) and Dahlan (Malay), and Siti Sara (Malay) and Yun Ming (Chinese), both of which metaphorically signify the syncretist possibilities of a polyglot, plural society that is currently (in the novel's present tense) experiencing racial and religious strife.

Unlike Fernando's encyclopaedic narratives that accommodate characters from different ethnic groups, Maniam's *The Return* is relatively ethnocentric and examines the circumstances of the diasporic Indian community in Malaysia. It traces the lives of three generations of an Indian family by centring on the life and career of its narrator-protagonist, Ravi, a dhobi's son born into a low caste Hindu family, who by a stroke of luck and sheer personal will makes good with his life. Ravi's own background brings to the fore the problems of class and caste hierarchy within the Indian community. Ravi and his people are poor, partly because of caste discrimination as people of the higher caste want to retain the privileging status quo and make sure that their hereditary control and superiority over the subalterns is not lost. The impoverished state of the low class/caste Indian community is recounted in the long passages describing the life at the long house, where Ravi was born and spent his childhood. Gender hierarchy is addressed through the three female characters: Periathai, Ravi's strong-spirited grandmother and his first ancestor in Malaysia; his unnamed mother, whose world remains confined to her kitchen; and Karupi, his stepmother. Ravi's father, Naina's, total control over his two wives and his occasional physical brutality towards them exposes the insignificance and inferiority of women in the India community at the time. However, in spite of the novel's focus on the Indians alone, it allegorically addresses the syncretist potential of Malaysia as a nation in the way Ravi acquires a new subjectivity and identity and comes to defy and demystify the caste hierarchy represented by Menon and the 'yellow territory' (a forbidden area for people of the lower caste). Moreover, Ravi gives up the exclusivist and regressive outlooks of his grandmother and father and adopts a mobile and deterritorialised life-style, which also metaphorically signals a fresh start for his people who are required to be more flexible, progressive and accommodating in order to contribute more actively to the self-refashioning of the newly emergent plural nation.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold* has certain affinities with Fernando's *Green is the Colour* as the novel deals with the same defining moment of the nation's history and has a similar encyclopaedic narrative scope, accommodating characters and experiences from diverse cultural groups. Set against the backdrop of the riots of 13th May 1969, it focuses on the interpersonal relationships among Li An, an English tutor at the University of Malaya, and her husband Henry; Li An's friends Gina and Ellen, and her university acquaintances Abdullah and Samad; Chester, an American Peace Corps volunteer; his American wife, Meryl; and Chester's daughter with Li An, Su Yin. Again, like *Green is the Colour*, the novel does not depict poverty as a theme per se as the characters are by and large from the middle class and are not challenged financially, but the novel shows considerable interest in dismantling gender and race classifications to construct

a just, balanced and encompassing nation. The subject of the subservience of women and the necessity of rediscovering their agency and subjectivity is depicted in Li An's step-father's despotic treatment of her mother; in Li An's own experience of total disregard from Chester, after he impregnates her and their 'love' child is born; in Gina's loss of identity from an unremitting fear of her domineering father; and in the way Su Yin is abused by her peers and teachers at school. Against these images of the sufferings and subordination of women, Li An and Meryl act as Lim's examples of emancipated females as they learn to become independent and self-reliant, without the need to depend on a man emotionally, economically or psychologically.

In addition to the gender binary, the author also pays substantial attention to the issues of racial stratification and equanimity. She suggests that the best way for Malaysia to forge a united, creole nation is to shun exclusivity and racial rigidity and engage in a process of creative negotiations and transactions between the different cultures. This is manifest in Lim's rejection of the monolithic view of nationalism expressed by Abdullah and Samad, who believe that 'like [should] stay with like ... Indian and Chinese cannot mix, too many differences.... Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water' (58). As opposed to this view, her protagonist, Li An claims that Malaysia is all 'mixed, rojak' and within 'a few more years [it will become] a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people' (44–45) — which is also the author's view and her hope for the future of Malaysia, similar to the writers of the short stories and novels discussed above. In spite of their differences in genre and narrative style, what brings these writers together is their recurrent tendency to interrogate issues that are endemic to Malaysia as a new nation and indicate ways that will make the country more tolerant, energetic and progressive in future, honouring the rights of all its citizens and treating them with equality and dignity notwithstanding their class, sex or race.

## CONCLUSION

Malaysian literature in English has encountered many challenges since its modest inception in colonial Singapore more than fifty years ago, but the most excruciating of these challenges has been its express marginalisation with the introduction of the Language Act of 1967 and the subsequent adoption of literature policies that made Malay literature the country's National Literature. This dichotomous position of the Anglophone tradition has compromised its prospects of becoming a growing centre of English writing, and in spite of its early promise, which saw the arrival of a number of serious writers, it has not been able to keep pace with the literary activities in some of the other post-colonial centres. This is not to say that the writers have not shown resilience to their unpropitious environment or that their allegiance to the local culture has not been deep, abiding or affirmative enough. On the contrary, the thematic explorations of their work suggest that they have constantly framed their narratives in relation to the place

or to the country's social and political history, and have tried to contribute to the process of nation formation in a positive and constructive way. In addition, they have attempted to indigenise their medium and their inherited literary forms to express their difference from the metropolis and apprehend Malaysia as a new 'frontier'. As a result, their works provide an important and authentic source for images of the national and cultural identity of Malaysia.

Given this contribution, it is important that works in English be seen as part of Malaysian national literature and the exclusive claim of one strand of literature to the centre of national culture be no longer perceived as a premise for the formation of 'Bangsa Malaysia'. Having a national language policy can be helpful for the creation of a unified nation; in that sense the significance of Bahasa Malaysia should not be underestimated, but the language policy should not translate into a literature policy and the medium should not be the sole criterion for the definition of national literature. On the contrary, emphasis should be on the meaning and message of the writing as well. As long as a literary work participates in, in Soyinka's phrase, the 'process of self-apprehension' (xi), and contributes to the formation and progression of nationhood and national identity, it should be seen as part of the self-constituting entity of national literature. Only when Malaysia adopts this inclusivist model of national literature, in which works and writers in all its languages can find an equal sense of belonging to the culture and engage in a fair competition with one another, without artificial barriers and privileging policies standing in their way, imaginative activities in the country will acquire a new impetus and new dynamism, transforming the current fissure in the literary scene into one holistic national enterprise, forming and reflecting its entire culture. In such an altered environment, literature in English will also regain its momentum and be able to compete with other post-colonial literary centres in a revived, robust and zestful spirit, realising the promise it showed with its first and second generation writers and building on it steadily, turning thereby its present sorrows and challenges into triumphs and glories in future.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 'Malaysian Literature in English: An Evolving Tradition'.
- <sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of the novel see 'A Malaysian Existentialist Story: Lee Kok Liang's *London Does Not Belong to Me*'.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, when asked how he felt about writing in English in the wake of the country's language policy, Kee Thuan Chye replied, 'I felt marginalised. I felt writing in English didn't count for anything because there was a literature policy that recognised only literature written in Malay as National Literature. This was demeaning' (135).
- <sup>4</sup> 'Malaysian Literature in English: Challenges and Prospects in the New Millennium'.
- <sup>5</sup> Killingley's 'A Question of Dowry' is available in *Twenty-Two Malaysian Short Stories* (ed. Lloyd Fernando). Anthony's 'Nannan', Kaur's 'Pasang' and 'Through the Wall', and Lim's 'Journey' and 'On Christmas Day in the Morning', are available in *Malaysian Short Stories* (ed. Lloyd Fernando). The rest of Lim's stories are available in her *Two Dreams*.

- <sup>6</sup> Fuller discussion of these novels as well as K.S. Maniam's *The Return* can be found in my other essays: 'Imagining "Bangsa Malaysia": Race, Religion and Gender in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour*'; 'Traversing Borders, Negotiating Identity: Portrayal of the Malaysian-Indian Diaspora in K.S. Maniam's *The Return*'; 'Nation, Gender, Identity: Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*'; "'My Country"/"Our Country": Race Dynamics and Contesting Nationalisms in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*'; and 'Self-Refashioning a Plural Society: Dialogism and Syncretism in Malaysian Postcolonial Literature'. See also Bernard Wilson's 'Legacy of Colonialism: Issues of Identity in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour*', M.Y. Chiu's, 'Imagining a Nation: Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* and National Identity', and Philip Holden's, 'Histories of the Present: Reading Contemporary Singapore Novels between the Local and the Global'.

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